

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L BELIZE 61

E.O.11652: GDS
TAGS: PBOR, BH, GT, UK
SUBJECT: INTERNAL POLITICAL SITUATION IN BELIZE

1. SUMMARY. SINCE THE DEFEAT OF PREMIER GEORGE PRICE'S PARTY (PUP) IN THE BELIZE CITY MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN DECEMBER, THE PUP HAS BEEN BESET BY INTERNAL DISSENTION WHICH HAS SERIOUSLY WEAKENED PRICE'S LEADERSHIP, AND HIS EFFORTS TO RESHUFFLE HIS CABINET HAVE BEEN THWARTED. MEANWHILE, AN ACRIMONIOUS PUBLIC DEBATE IN REGARD TO THE PREMIER'S ROLE IN CURRENT EFFORTS TO RESOLVE THE UK-GUATEMALA TERRITORIAL DISPUTE AND EXPECIALLY ON THE QUESTION OF CEDING BELIZEAN TERRITORY TO GUATEMALA HAS FURTHER POLLUTED THE LOCAL POLITICAL ATMOSPHERE. PRICE HIMSELF IS BEGINNING TO SHOW THE STRAIN. END SUMMARY.

2. DISSENTION WITHIN THE PUP. ACCORDING TO QUALIFIED SOURCES WITH WHOM WE HAVE DISCUSSED THE SUBJECT IN THE COURSE OF THE PAST MONTH, THE DEFEAT SUSTAINED BY THE PUP IN THE DECEMBER MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN BELIZE CITY HAS PRODUCED A DEGREE OF INTERNAL DISSENTION SERIOUS ENOUGH TO JEOPARDIZE PRICE'S CONTROL OF THE PARTY. THIS DISSENTION, WE ARE TOLD, DERIVES IN LARGE PART FROM CONFLICTING ASSESSMENTS AS TO WHY THE PUP WAS DEFEATED IN DECEMBER
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AND WHAT IT MUST DO TO AVERT AN EVEN MORE DAMAGING DEFEAT IN THE 1979 NATIONAL ELECTIONS.

3. COMMUNISTS VS GANGSTERS. INTERNAL ALIGNMENT WITHIN THE PUP IS CURRENTLY POLARIZED BETWEEN TWO FACTIONS JOCLARLY REFERRED TO IN LOCAL PARLANCE AS "COMMUNISTS" AND "GANGSTERS." SPOKESMEN FOR THE MORE LIBERAL FACTION (WHO ARE NOT REALLY COMMUNISTS, SO FAR

AS WE KNOW) LED BY ATTORNEY GENERAL ASSAD SHOMAN AND SENATOR SAID MUSA ATTRIBUTE THE PARTY'S DEFEAT TO THE INCREASINGLY BLATANT CORRUPTION ON THE PART OF MINISTERS C.L.B. ROGERS (HOME AFFAIRS AND HEALTH), LOUIS SYLVESTRE (ENERGY AND COMMUNICATIONS) AND FRED HUNTER (PUBLIC WORKS), THE LEADING FIGURES OF THE OTHER FACTION (THE "GANGSTERS" LABEL MAY BE ONLY A SLIGHT EXAGGERATION). THE LATTER ARE UNDERSTOOD TO BLAME THE PUP'S REJECTION BY THE VOTERS OF BELIZE CITY ON THE ALLEGEDLY LEFTWARD LEANING, ANTI-BUSINESS VIEWS OF SHOMAN AND HIS COHORTS AND ON PREMIER PRICE'S HANDLING OF THE BELIZE DISPUTE. BOTH FACTIONS, HOWEVER, ARE SAID TO BELIEVE THAT THE CRISIS OF LAST JULY AND THE CURRENT SPECULATION IN REGARD TO THE CESSION OF BELIZEAN TERRITORY TO GUATEMALA HAVE BEEN DAMAGING TO THE PUP.

4. ATTEMPTED CABINET SHUFFLE FAILS. PREMIER PRICE IS SAID TO INCLINE TOWARD THE VIEWS OF LIBERAL FACTION, AND HE IS REPORTED TO BE QUITE CONCERNED ABOUT THE REPUTATION FOR CORRUPTION SOME OF HIS MINISTERS HAVE ACQUIRED. ACCORDINGLY, EARLY IN JANUARY, HE TRIED TO EFFECT A CABINET RESHUFFLE. VARIOUS FORMULAS WERE DISCUSSED. THE PLAN FINALLY ADOPTED INVOLVED NO MORE THAN A THREE-WAY EXCHANGE INVOLVING HUNTER, SYLVESTRE AND AGRICULTURE MINISTER MARIN. (ROGERS WOULD HAVE BEEN INVULNERABLE) ALL THREE RESISTED TO THE POINT OF THREATENING TO LEAVE THE PARTY, AND PRICE WAS FORCED TO BACK DOWN, A HUMILIATING RETREAT. SINCE THIS INCIDENT, RELIABLE SOURCES HAVE CITED AS EVIDENCE OF THE WEAKENING OF PRICE'S LEADERSHIP THE CHAOS AND BICKERING OF RECENT CABINET

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MEETINGS WHICH, WE ARE TOLD, CONTRASTS SHARPLY WITH THE ORDERLY, AUTHORITARIAN MANNER IN WHICH THE PREMIER USED TO CONDUCT THEM.

5. PUBLIC DEBATE ON CESSION. IN RECENT WEEKS, NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF NEGOTIATIONS AIMED AT SETTLING THE UK-GUATEMALA DISPUTE OVER BELIZE HAS BEEN INTENSE, ALTHOUGH BASED LARGELY ON SPECULATION, SOME OF IT FAIRLY CLOSE TO THE MARK, BUT MOST OF IT WILDLY INACCURATE. MOST OF THIS HAS CENTERED ON THE QUESTION OF A POSSIBLE CESSION OF BELIZEAN TERRITORY TO GUATEMALA WITH GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION PARTIES EACH TRYING TO PORTRAY THE OTHER AS SECRETLY AMENABLE TO TRADING BELIZEAN TERRITORY FOR INDEPENDENCE, GENERALLY VIEWED HERE AS AKIN TO TREASON. THE PUP HAS NEVER CEASED TO DECRY AN EDITORIAL IN OPPOSITION NEWSPAPER REPORTER ALMOST A YEAR AGO, IN WHICH EDITOR HARRY LAWRENCE HAD SUGGESTED THAT PERHAPS BELIZE OUGHT TO CONSIDER MAKING A TOKEN CESSION OF TERRITORY IN EXCHANGE FOR GUATEMALAN PEACEFUL ACQUIESCENCE IN INDEPENDENCE FOR BELIZE. THE UDP HAS REPEATEDLY AND EMPHATICALLY DISAVOWED THIS SUGGESTION. MEANWHILE THE REPORTER AND THE BEACON (THE UDP OFFICIAL ORGAN) HAVE CONTINUED TO EMPHASIZE THE DANGERS OF INDEPENDENCE AND HAVE CONCENTRATED THEIR FIRE ON PRICE'S ALLEGED WILLINGNESS TO CEDE TERRITORY IN THE CURRENT NEGOTIATIONS, ON THE CONCESSIONS OFFERED BY PREMIER PRICE IN HIS UN SPEECH LAST FALL

AND ON THE EXISTENCE OF AN ALLEGED DRAFT TREATY WHICH OPPOSITION PAPERS CLAIM INCORPORATES THESE CONCESSIONS. LAST WEEK IN AN EDITORIAL ATTACKING THE SUPPOSED LIMITATIONS ON BELIZEAN SOVEREIGNTY INHERENT IN THE ALLEGED DRAFT TREATY, EDITOR LAWRENCE DEFENDED HIS PREVIOUS EDITORIAL ON CESSION. FOR THIS, THE UDP EXECUTIVE COUNCIL VOTED TO STRIP HIM OF HIS POSITION AS DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF THE PARTY. THIS INCIDENT, HOWEVER, HAS PROVIDED MATERIAL FOR ONLY A RATHER WEAK PUP COUNTERATTACK TO THE WELTER OF CHARGES LEVELED AT PRICE BY THE OPPOSITION PRESS IN RECENT WEEKS.

6. STATE OF PREMIER'S HEALTH AND MORALE. IT IS NOT SURPRISING THAT THE PAST FEW MONTHS HAVE BEEN UNUSUALLY WEARING ON THE PREMIER. HE HAS APPEARED NOTICEABLY TIRED LATELY, AND GOVERNOR MCENTEE RECENTLY CONFIDED TO ME THAT HE WAS WORRIED ABOUT CONFIDENTIAL

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THE PREMIER'S HEALTH AND STATE OF MIND. IN RECENT WEEKS, ACCORDING TO THE GOVERNOR, PRICE HAD SEEMED DISCOURAGED AND UNCHARACTERISTICALLY APATHETIC. AT ONE POINT HE HAD WONDERED ALOUD WHETHER HE SHOULDN'T ADMIT FAILURE AND RESIGN. RUMORS ARE GOING AROUND THAT THE PREMIER IS "NOT AT ALL WELL." GIVEN THE LOW RELIABILITY OF RUMORS IN BELIZE THE GREATER PROBABILITY IS THAT PRICE IS SUFFERING FROM SIMPLE FATIGUE.

7. COMMENT: THE SITUATION EVOLVING HERE IS FUNDAMENTALLY NEW IN TWO IMPORTANT RESPECTS. THE PUP NO LONGER DOMINATES THE BELIZEAN POLITICAL LANDSCAPE THAT IT HAS FOR MANY YEARS, AND PREMIER PRICE NO LONGER DOMINATES THE PUP. UNFORTUNATELY, NEITHER IS THERE ANY SIGN ON THE HORIZON OF ALTERNATIVE NEW LEADERSHIP WHICH MIGHT OFFER SOME HOPE FOR RESPONSIBLE AND EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF THE COUNTRY. THE UP'S RECENT ELECTORAL SUCCESSES WERE LARGELY THE RESULT OF A PROTEST VOTE; REAL LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL IN THE OPPOSITION PARTY AND UNEASINESS; THE OUTLOOK IS FOR A CONTINUED DECLINE IN THE UNITY OF THE COUNTRY'S POLITICAL LIFE. INTEMPERATE RHETORIC AND UNBRIDLED DEMAGOGUERY WHICH NORMALLY CHARACTERIZE THE DISCUSSION OF PUBLIC ISSUES HERE WILL PROBABLY WORSEN, RATHER THAN IMPROVE IN THE MONTHS AHEAD. ALL IN ALL, IT IS DIFFICULT TO IMAGINE THE BELIZEAN BODY POLITIC RESPONDING RATIONALLY AND PRUDENTLY TO THE DIFFICULT DECISIONS THEY MAY BE ASKED TO MAKE IF THE CURRENT NEGOTIATIONS ARE SUCCESSFUL.
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